

A Non-Authoritative Introduction to the Pali Canon

This past year, during the process of writing the annotated notes of Dharma Talks at Coastside Vipassana (<http://coastsidevipassana.org/dharmataalks.htm>), I've had opportunity to frequently brush against the Pali Canon, which is *the* most important collection of Buddhist scriptures in the Theravada tradition.



I once read that the Pali Canon is “vast and incomprehensible.” Just looking at the Wikipedia photo of the Pali Canon’s 45 volumes convinces me of the “vast” aspect. As for the “incomprehensible” part, you’ll have to decide that for yourself!

If you want to read the entire compilation, you need to be fluent in Pali. However, a great deal of the Pali Canon, including the 1,000 most important suttas (discourses), is available in English at

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/>.

Like most other works of significance, regardless of subject matter, the Pali Canon has its community of scholars and experts. The scholars and experts do not agree on everything, so a search of the literature may turn up conflicting information. I generally relied on Theravada sources for my information and used materials consistent with that point of view. There are other versions available that may or may not be authoritative. I found the Pali Tipitaka site (<http://www.tipitaka.org/>) and Access to Insight (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/>) especially useful. I also found Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pali_Canon) to be helpful in some areas. *I am not a Pali Canon scholar, I’m not a dharma teacher, and I’m not a lawyer.* (I always put that last one in, just in case). So, In the spirit of the Kalama Sutta (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/soma/wheel008.html>), don’t take my

word for any of this information-- investigate the Pali Canon for yourself and draw your own conclusions!

Pali and Sanskrit

Sanskrit is the classical language of India, and has been used for scholarly and religious works for about 4,000 years. Pali (formerly known as Magadhi) is a language that was understood in many regions of India, predating the birth of the Buddha, and was widely understood throughout India. Some traditions have it that Pali was the language the Buddha taught in. At the least, Pali is very close to the Buddha's language. (See <http://www.rakhapura.com/articles/the-home-of-pali.asp> for more information on this.)

The Pali Canon is, of course, written in Pali. It is common to see Buddhist terms described in either, or both, Pali and Sanskrit. When I took Buddhism classes in college, we used the Sanskrit terms. In addition, I just think Sanskrit sounds better – to me, Pali sounds like speaking Sanskrit with a cold. (Aversion noted.) My tendency is to use Sanskrit, but I will try to stick with Pali, and not slip into Sanskrit through being unmindful.

Here are some common Buddhist terms in both languages.

| <u>Sanskrit</u> | <u>Pali</u> |
|------------------------|--------------------|
| Karma | Khamma |
| Sutra | Sutta |
| Dharma | Dhamma |
| Nirvana | Nibbana |
| Tripitaka | Tipitaka |

In the Beginning....

The Buddha lived in the 5th century Before the Christian Era (BCE), and taught for nearly 45 years; but none of the teachings were written down. This was not because of any sloth or torpor on the part of the followers -- written language had not yet been invented in India.

While the Buddha was alive, he would spend about four months every year, reviewing and discussing his teachings with his followers. Immediately after his death, though, the Buddha's followers began to see disagreements among the monastics about what the proper path should be, and exactly what the Buddha taught. While the Buddha was alive, they had an authoritative source to go to, but afterwards, the teachings started to diverge. Action was needed before it all dissipated!

According to tradition, 500 Arahants (enlightened senior monks) gathered together in The First Buddhist Council (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Buddhist_Council) three months after the Buddha's death, and started to compare their recollections of what he had taught.

Ananda, the Buddha's companion, had been present for most of the Buddha's talks. In a pre-literate society, accurate memory was the norm, and among those skilled practitioners, Ananda had a reputation for possessing an exceptional and prodigious memory. However, at the time the invitations were sent out, Ananda was not enlightened, and was excluded from the Council. Fortunately, Ananda achieved Nibbana in the nick of time, and became a major contributor to the remembrances.

Ananda and other followers recited the talks of the Buddha, and the Council, which consisted of many who had attended the same talks, listened and corrected each other according to group memory. When agreement was reached on what the Buddha had actually said, each talk was memorized by a small group of monks. Many scholars believe that the talks used the memory aids of repetition and stock phrases (hence the repetitious and formal manner of the discourses), while others think these stylized formats came later.

Each group memorizing a particular talk was responsible for keeping and teaching that talk, and this oral tradition preserved the Buddha's teachings. Periodically, these groups would get together and review the teachings to make sure that nothing had been forgotten or changed from the original

About Two Centuries Later...

In 270 BCE, Ashoka, an Indian prince and fearsome warrior, was crowned emperor over the Magadha region in India. Known as Ashoka the Cruel, he began a bloody conquest of the entire Indian subcontinent. The city-state of Kalinga put up a particularly fierce defense, and the blood-thirsty Ashoka countered by assembling the largest army ever seen in India. He proceeded to plunder and destroy Kalinga, killing over 100,000 people. The day after the battle was over, Ashoka walked about the city, and seeing nothing but corpses and burned houses, he was overcome by the extent of the destruction. Asking himself, *“What have I done? If this is victory, what is defeat?”* Ashoka converted to Buddhism, began a campaign against violence throughout his kingdom, made Buddhism the state religion, and became known as Ashoka the Great.

Ashoka convened the Third Buddhist Council to strengthen the sangha and to begin carrying Buddhism to surrounding countries. Ashoka’s son, Mahinda, traveled to Sri Lanka and converted the King and country to Buddhism. Some years after Ashoka’s death, India and several surrounding countries were purged of Buddhism by Muslim invaders. Sri Lanka was one of the few places where the complete oral tradition had been preserved.

Later that Millennium...

In 92 BCE, a famine in Sri Lanka caused concern that portions of the Buddha’s teaching may be lost if the monks responsible for a particular section all died. A Fifth Buddhist Council was held to deal with this crisis, and as a result, a great project was organized to transcribe all of the oral tradition on palm leaves (although writing had been invented by then, paper had not).

The palm leaves were organized into three baskets (*pitaka*) – one for the monastic rules (the Vinaya), one for in-depth study (the Abhidhamma), and one for everyone (the Suttas). (See <http://www.lovasinhala.com/ospp> and <http://www.accesstosight.org/lib/authors/perera/wheel100.html>) This collection became known as the three baskets (Tipitaka), or the Pali Canon

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pali_Canon), and tradition has it that the original oral content has been preserved virtually unchanged since the time of the Buddha.

In the 19th century, the British discovered and began to translate the Pali Canon into English. There were some concerns about the accuracy of the initial translations, but as Theravada monastics, fluent in both Pali and English, began new translations in the past few decades, based on an understanding of the Dhamma, the accuracy improved. Although the entire Pali Canon has not yet been translated into English, a large portion, and particularly the important sections, has been made available online.

The First Basket

The Vinaya, or Book of Discipline, includes the compilation of rules for monastics. When the followers of the Buddha were only a small community, there was not much problem in maintaining harmony. As the number of followers grew, the community grew more complex and conflict or other unskillful acts would occur. When these were brought to the Buddha's attention, he developed a rule of behavior to deal with potential future occurrences, and the consequences for *intentionally* failing to follow that rule.

The benefit of discipline is explained in the Parivaara section of the Vinaya:

*The Discipline is for the sake of restraint,
restraint for the sake of freedom from remorse,
freedom from remorse for the sake of joy,
joy for the sake of rapture,
rapture for the sake of tranquility,
tranquility for the sake of pleasure,
pleasure for the sake of concentration,
concentration for the sake of knowledge
and vision of things as they are,
knowledge and vision of things as they are
for the sake of disenchantment,
disenchantment for the sake of release,*

*release for the sake of knowledge and vision of release,
knowledge and vision of release
for the sake of total unbinding without clinging.*

— Parivaara.XII.2

The Vinaya includes explanations of many of the rules-- usually the situation that caused the rule to be developed in the first place. These rules, rather than being a collection of archaic regulations as one might think, provide a path to a deeper understanding of the principles of Buddhism, and give examples of how to maintain harmony in any organization and how to avoid unskillful action.

Monks are not permitted to touch women. In *The Bhikkhus' Rules: Guide for Laypeople* (<http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/ariyesako/layguide.html>), Bhikkhu Ariyesako explains:

The modern West has stories of sexual harassment, so the ways that the Buddha dealt with such matters should not seem so very strange.

If a bhikkhu touches a woman in a sexual way, he commits a very serious offence requiring formal meetings of the Community and probation ([Sa"nghadisesa](#)). The scrupulous bhikkhu wants to remain above suspicion so, if he can, he will avoid all physical contact. (Hence his attitude to shaking hands. This also explains why in Thailand a receiving cloth is used to receive offerings from women.)

The rule was first set down by the Buddha after a brahman and his wife had gone to inspect Ven. Udaayin's fine dwelling. As Ven. Udaayin was showing them around, he came up behind the lady and "rubbed up against her limb by limb." After they had left, the husband praised Ven. Udaayin but the wife was critical and explained what had happened. The brahman then complained, "Isn't it even possible to take one's wife to a monastery without her being molested?" This rule was then set down:

"Should any bhikkhu, overcome by lust, with altered mind, engage in bodily contact with a woman, or in holding her hand, holding a lock of her hair, or caressing any of her limbs, it entails initial and subsequent meetings of the Community."(Sa"ngh. 2; BMC p.100)

To be at fault, the bhikkhu must usually do some action to bring contact with a woman while lust overcomes his mind. If he accidentally stumbles and bumps into a woman or vice-versa, or if he is accosted by a woman, as long as there is no intention to come into lustful contact there is no offence. However, the average bhikkhu's mind tends to be so quick and unruly — he is, after all, still in training and therefore unenlightened — that he may prefer to be super-cautious about such situations.

There are several types of rules in the Vinaya. Many of the rules are training guides or etiquette. For example, it is considered poor etiquette for a monk to laugh loudly in public (i.e., inhabited) places, to not appreciate alms food, to slurp while eating, or to talk with a full mouth. There are also rules about duties, such as when to sweep the porch and the duties of a pupil to his teacher.

The Vinaya provides rules for resolving disputes and unskillful actions. One which I found interesting was a healing and forgiving process called “covering over as with grass.”

This refers to situations in which both sides of a dispute realize that, in the course of their dispute, they have done much that is unworthy of a contemplative. If they were to deal with one another for their offenses, the only result would be greater divisiveness. Thus if both sides agree, all the bhikkhus gather in one place. (According to the Commentary, this means that all bhikkhus in the sima must attend. No one should send his consent, and even sick bhikkhus must go.) A motion is made to the entire group that this procedure will be followed. One member of each side then makes a formal motion to the members of his faction that he will make a confession for them. When both sides are ready, the

representative of each side addresses the entire group and makes the blanket confession, using the form of a motion and one announcement (natti-dutiya-kamma).

There are rules covering actions which require confession. For example, intentionally eavesdropping on other monks while they are arguing; showing disrespect; tickling; hiding another monk's robe or bowl (even as a joke); concealing another monk's serious offense; evasive speech, and other actions which may disturb members of the community or cause loss of harmony, require confession.

For actions which include the possession of items which are more than allotted or more luxurious than those permitted to monks, the corrective action includes confession and forfeiture of the goods. In this category are such things as extra robes, silk clothing or blankets, ivory needle boxes, or padded mattresses.

There are rules that are considered more critical than those which can be corrected by confession. In these cases, violating a rule calls for a meeting of the community to discuss it, and a rebuke to the monastic whose behavior was not skillful. The Buddha's standard rebuke was:

It is not fit, foolish man, it is not becoming, it is not proper, it is unworthy of a recluse, it is not lawful, it ought not to be done. How could you, foolish man, having gone forth under this Dhamma and Discipline which are well-taught, [commit such and such offense]?... It is not, foolish man, for the benefit of unbelievers, nor for the increase in the number of believers, but, foolish man, it is to the detriment of both unbelievers and believers, and it causes wavering in some.

— *The Book of the Discipline, Part I*, by I.B. Horner (London: Pali Text Society, 1982), pp. 36-37.

In this category fall such unskillful activities such as sexual harassment; creating a schism in a united community; falsely accusing another monk of a significant offense; forming cliques; blackmail or extortion of other monks; or resisting admonishment.

Some of these actions may result in the community temporarily banishing the offender, but at the very least require an open discussion by the full community.

The most severe infractions, however, are the Pārājika. For monks, there are four offenses that call for expulsion from the Sangha. These are called “Defeats” and irrevocably separate the monk from affiliation with the community.

Three of the defeats are not terribly surprising: sexual intercourse (in a very broad and inclusive sense); major theft; and intentionally killing or conspiring to kill a human being or encouraging him toward suicide. The fourth defeat, however, is a monk claiming to be more than he is. If a monk intentionally and falsely claims a superior human state, or a truly noble knowledge (such as enlightenment or supernatural powers), he is defeated and no longer in affiliation.

I had skipped reading the Viyana for a long time, under the impression that it was just for monastics, and consisted of long lists of rules, such as the proper way to clean cobwebs. The Viyana is much more interesting than that. It provides insight and explanation of many skillful actions, and many historical stories of life in the Buddha’s time. The Viyana even includes The Story of Prince Dighavu, which Thanissaro Bhikkhu calls “one of the most dramatic stories in the Pali canon — a tale of murder, intrigue, and revenge — which teaches the wisest way to ‘settle an old score.’”

(<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/vin/mv/mv.10.02.03-20.than.html>)

I wonder if anyone has the movie rights to the Vinaya?

The Second Basket

The second basket is the Buddha’s suttas (discourses). These are meant for any audience, and there are over 10,000 suttas grouped into five collections (nikaya).

- Digha Nikaya (DN) — the "long discourses"
- Majjhima Nikaya (MN)— the "middle-length discourses"
- Samyutta Nikaya (SN) — the "connected discourses"

- Anguttara Nikaya (AN) — the "numerical discourses"
- Khuddaka Nikaya (KN) — the "collection of little texts"

At first glance, the categorization of the collections seems a little odd. In the general introduction to *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*¹, Bhikkhu Bodhi tells us:

Prevalent scholarly opinion, fostered by the texts themselves, holds that the principal basis for distinguishing the [first] four Nikayas is the length of their suttas. Thus the largest suttas are collected into the Digha Nikaya, the middle length suttas into the Majjhima Nikaya, and the shorter suttas are distributed between the Samyutta and the Anguttara Nikayas, the former classifying its suttas thematically, the latter by way of the number of items in terms of which the exposition is framed. However, in an important groundbreaking study, Pali scholar Joy Manne has challenged the assumption that length alone explains the differences between the Nikayas. By carefully comparing the suttas of DN with those of MN, Manne concludes that the two collections are intended to serve two different purposes within the Buddha's dispensation. In her view, DN was primarily intended for the purpose of propaganda, to attract converts to the new religion, and thus is aimed mainly at nonBuddhists favourably disposed to Buddhism; MN, in contrast, was directed inwards towards the Buddhist community and its purpose was to extol the Master (both as a real person and as an archetype) and to integrate monks into the community and the practice. Manne also proposes that "each of the first four Nikayas came about in order to serve a distinct need and purpose in the growing and developing Buddhist community".

The Samyutta Nikayas are grouped by content and common themes. For example, there are verses which connected because they deal with discourses to Bramhas, or Devas, or with Mara, or some other subject in common.

¹ <http://www.amazon.com/Connected-Discourses-Buddha-Translation-Samyutta/dp/0861713311/>

The Anguttara Nikaya are grouped by the number of things being discussed. So, we have, for example, the Chapter of the Sixes, ...the Sevens...the Eights, etc.

Bhikkhu Bodhi advances this view of the audience for the Samyutta Nikaya and the Anguttara Nikaya²:

SN was compiled to serve as the repository for the many short but pithy suttas disclosing the Buddha's radical insights into the nature of reality and his unique path to spiritual emancipation. This collection would have served the needs of two types of disciples within the monastic order. One were the doctrinal specialists, those monks and nuns who were capable of grasping the deepest dimensions of wisdom and took upon themselves the task of clarifying for others the subtle perspectives on reality opened up by the Buddha's teachings. ...The second type of disciples for whom SN seems to have been designed were those monks and nuns who had already fulfilled the preliminary stages of meditative training and were intent on consummating their efforts with the direct realization of the ultimate truth. Because the suttas in this collection are vitally relevant to meditators bent on arriving at the undeceptive "knowledge of things as they really are," they could well have formed the main part of a study syllabus compiled for the guidance of insight meditators.

With the move from SN to AN, a shift in emphasis takes place from comprehension to personal edification. AN ...includes a notable proportion of suttas addressed to lay disciples, dealing with the mundane, ethical, and spiritual concerns of life within the world. This makes it especially suitable as a text for the edification of the laity.

The Khuddaka Nikaya is a group of miscellaneous books, that don't fit well into the other categories. That doesn't mean they are less important – for example,

² From the general introduction to The Connected Discourses of the Buddha <http://www.amazon.com/Connected-Discourses-Buddha-Translation-Samyutta/dp/0861713311/> pages 32-33.

the Dhammapada, which monastics are expected to memorize for their ordination, is included.

And in Basket Number Two....

Here are brief descriptions of the books in the **Sutta Pitaka**, from Access to Insight (<http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/kn/index.html>).

*The **Digha Nikaya**, or "Collection of Long Discourses" (Pali digha = "long") is the first division of the Sutta Pitaka, and consists of thirty-four suttas, grouped into three vaggas, or divisions:*

- 1. Silakkhandha-vagga — The Division Concerning Morality (13 suttas)*
- 2. Maha-vagga — The Large Division (10 suttas)*
- 3. Patika-vagga — The Patika Division (11 suttas)*

*The **Majjhima Nikaya**, or "Middle-length Discourses" of the Buddha, is the second of the five nikayas (collections) of the Sutta Pitaka.*

This nikaya consists of 152 discourses by the Buddha and his chief disciples, which together constitute a comprehensive body of teaching concerning all aspects of the Buddha's teachings.

*An excellent modern translation of the complete Majjhima Nikaya is **The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya**, translated by Bhikkhu Ñanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi [<http://www.amazon.com/Middle-Length-Discourses-Buddha-Translation/dp/086171072X/>] The Introduction to that book contains an extraordinary synopsis of the Buddha's teachings in general, and of their expression in the Majjhima in particular. A fine anthology of selected suttas is **Handful of Leaves (Vol. 1)**, by Thanissaro Bhikkhu (distributed by the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies).*

The **Samyutta Nikaya**, the third division of the Sutta Pitaka, contains 2,889 suttas grouped into five sections (vaggas). Each vagga is further divided into samyuttas, each of which in turn contains a group of suttas on related topics. The samyuttas are named according to the topics of the suttas they contain. For example, the Kosala Samyutta (in the Sagatha Vagga) contains suttas concerning King Pasenadi of Kosala; the Vedana Samyutta (in the Salayatana Vagga) contains suttas concerning feeling (vedana); and so on.

The **Anguttara Nikaya**, the fourth division of the Sutta Pitaka consists of several thousand suttas arranged in eleven books (nipatas) according to numerical content. For example, the first nipata — the Book of the Ones — contains suttas concerning a single topic; the second nipata — the Book of the Twos — contains suttas concerning pairs of things (e.g., a sutta about tranquillity and insight; another about the two people one can never adequately repay (one's parents); another about two kinds of happiness; etc.); the third nipata contains suttas concerning three things (e.g., a sutta on the three kinds of praiseworthy acts; another about three kinds of offense), and so on.

The **Khuddaka Nikaya**, or "Collection of Little Texts" (Pali khudda = "smaller; lesser"), the fifth division of the Sutta Pitaka, is a wide-ranging collection of fifteen books (eighteen in the Burmese Tipitaka) containing complete suttas, verses, and smaller fragments of Dhamma teachings. While many of these have been treasured and memorized by devout Buddhists around the world for centuries, others have never left the private domain of Pali scholars; some have yet to be translated into English.

1. Khuddakapatha — The Short Passages

A collection of nine short passages that may have been designed as a primer for novice monks and nuns. It includes

several essential texts that to this day are regularly chanted by laypeople and monastics around the world of Theravada Buddhism. These passages include: the formula for taking refuge; the ten precepts; and the Metta, Mangala, and Ratana suttas.

2. Dhammapada — The Path of Dhamma

This much-beloved collection of 423 short verses has been studied and learned by heart over the centuries by millions of Buddhists around the world.

3. Udana — Exclamations

A rich collection of short suttas, each of which culminates in a short verse uttered by the Buddha. Here you will find the parable of the blind men and the elephant (Ud 6.4); the story of Nanda and the "dove-footed nymphs" (Ud 3.2); and many memorable similes (e.g., "Just as the ocean has one taste — the taste of salt — so this Dhamma-Vinaya has one taste, the taste of release." (Ud 5.5)). Many gems here!

4. Itivuttaka — The Thus-saids

A collection of 112 short suttas, in mixed prose and verse form, each of which addresses a single well-focused topic of Dhamma. The Itivuttaka takes its name from the Pali phrase that introduces each sutta: iti vuttam Bhagavata, "Thus was said by the Buddha."

5. Sutta Nipata — The Sutta Collection

71 short suttas, including the Karaniya Metta Sutta (Good-will/Loving-kindness), the Maha-mangala Sutta (Protection), and the Atthaka Vagga, a chapter of sixteen poems on the theme of non-clinging.

6. *Vimnavatthu — Stories of the Celestial Mansions*

83 poems, each explaining how wholesome deeds led to a particular deity's rebirth in one of the heavenly realms.

7. *Petavatthu — Stories of the Hungry Ghosts*

51 poems, each explaining how unwholesome deeds led to the rebirth of a being into the miserable realm of the "Hungry Ghosts" (peta).

8. *Theragatha — Verses of the Elder Monks*

9. *Therigatha — Verses of the Elder Nuns*

These two books offer exquisitely beautiful personal accounts, in verse form, of the lives of the early monks and nuns, often culminating in a lovely simile to describe their experience of Awakening. These verses depict — in often heart-breaking detail — the many hardships these men and women endured and overcame during their quest for Awakening, and offer deep inspiration and encouragement to the rest of us.

10. *Jataka — Birth Stories*

547 tales that recount some of the Buddha's former lives during his long journey as a Bodhisatta aspiring to Awakening.

11. *Niddesa — Exposition*

This book, traditionally ascribed to Sariputta, is a series of commentaries on sections of the Sutta Nipata. The first part, the Mahaniddesa, is a commentary on the Atthakavagga; the second, the Culaniddesa, a commentary on the Parayanavagga and the Khaggavisana Sutta (Sn 1.3).

12. Patisambhidamagga — Path of Discrimination

An analysis of Abhidhamma concepts.

Description courtesy of Hugo G, Tep Sastri, and Han Tun:

The Path of Discrimination (Patisambhidamagga) is the richest discourse by Arahant Sariputta Thera on the Buddha's Teachings in the questions-and-answers format. A.K. Warder succinctly described the most important feature of this great work by saying : "it expounds the way or path of 'discrimination' in its various aspects and tries to show exactly how understanding takes place in a practical sense, not simply in theory."

The book consists of thirty treatises. They span the various kinds of knowledges (associated with learning, virtue, concentration, dependent origination, comprehension, rise & fall of phenomena, dissolution, appearance of terror, equanimity about formations, and so on), views, breathing meditation, the five faculties, liberation, action (kamma), paths, truths, lovingkindness, powers, voidness, foundations of

13. Apadana — Stories

Biographies, in verse, of the Buddha, 41 Paccekabuddhas ("silent" Buddhas), 549 arahant bhikkhus and 40 arahant bhikkhunis. Many of these stories are characterized by flowery paeans celebrating the glory, wonder, magnificence, etc. of the Buddha. The Apadana is believed to be a late

addition to the Canon, added at the Second and Third Buddhist Councils.

14. Buddhavamsa — History of the Buddhas

Biographical accounts of Gotama Buddha and of the 24 Buddhas who preceded him.

15. Cariyapitaka — Basket of Conduct

Stories, in verse, of 35 of the Buddha's previous lives. These stories, purportedly retold by the Buddha at Ven. Sariputta's request, illustrate the Bodhisatta's practice of seven of the ten paramis (perfections).

The Third Basket

The Abhidhamma is difficult. When I mentioned “incomprehensible” as an aspect of the Pali Canon, I think the Abhidhamma fulfills that role quite well. In a sense, this reminds me a “cheat sheet” - if you know a subject well, but just need reminders of the categories and concepts, then you might use a cheat sheet that just lists formulas, phrases, etc. without much explanation. The Abhidhamma is like that.

From Access to Insight <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/abhi/index.html>

The seven books of the Abhidhamma Pitaka, the third division of the Tipitaka, offer an extraordinarily detailed analysis of the basic natural principles that govern mental and physical processes. Whereas the Sutta and Vinaya Pitakas lay out the practical aspects of the Buddhist path to Awakening, the Abhidhamma Pitaka provides a theoretical framework to explain the causal underpinnings of that very path. In Abhidhamma philosophy the familiar psycho-physical universe (our world of "trees" and "rocks," "I" and "you") is distilled to its essence: an intricate web of impersonal phenomena and processes unfolding at an inconceivably rapid pace from moment to moment, according to precisely defined natural laws.

According to tradition, the essence of the Abhidhamma was formulated by the Buddha during the fourth week after his Enlightenment. Seven years later he is said to have spent three consecutive months preaching it in its entirety in one of the deva realms, before an audience of thousands of devas (including his late mother, the former Queen Maya), each day briefly commuting back to the human realm to convey to Ven. Sariputta the essence of what he had just taught. Sariputta mastered the Abhidhamma and codified it into roughly its present form. Although parts of the Abhidhamma were recited at the earlier Buddhist Councils, it wasn't until the Third Council (ca. 250 BCE) that it became fixed into its present form as the third and final Pitaka of the canon.

Despite its relatively late entrance into the Canon, the Abhidhamma stands as an essential pillar of classical Theravada Buddhist thought. Its significance does, however, vary considerably across regional and cultural boundaries. In Thai Buddhism, for example, the Abhidhamma (and, for that matter, many of the Commentaries as well) play a relatively minor role in Buddhist doctrine and practice. In Sri Lanka and Myanmar (Burma), however, they hold the same venerated status as the Vinaya and Sutta Pitakas themselves. The modern Burmese approach to the teaching and practice of Satipatthana meditation, in particular, relies heavily on an Abhidhammic interpretation of meditative experience. Regardless of the Abhidhamma's position on the shelf of Buddhist canonical texts, the astonishing detail with which it methodically constructs a quasi-scientific model of mind (enough, by far, to make a modern systems theorist or cognitive scientist gasp in awe), insures its place in history as a monumental feat of intellectual genius.

Summary

There is a lot of information in the Tipitaka. I would recommend taking a spin through the online version of the parts of the Vinaya that are interesting, and browse Access to Insight a lot – the essays in there are great. As far as purchasing hard copies, I would recommend the Middle Length Discourses (<http://www.amazon.com/Middle-Length->

[Discourses-Buddha-Translation/dp/086171072X/](http://www.amazon.com/Dhammapada-Translation-Buddhist-Classic-Annotations/dp/086171072X/)) and the Dhammapada (<http://www.amazon.com/Dhammapada-Translation-Buddhist-Classic-Annotations/dp/1590303806/>) . In addition, the Handful of Leaves series, available from Sati Center (<http://www.sati.org/books.html>) is an excellent collection.

If you start reading now, you might be able to finish in only one or two lifetimes!

With metta,

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